



Innovative early learning center opens in Santa Fe

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With the artwork in the halls, and the noise of engaged young students in the classroom of this 1940s-era school building, a visitor might think they were in a regular preschool near the beginning of the school year. But the newly-opened United Way Early Learning Center at Kaune – known as Kaune Kids – is actually an innovative facility for the region, part of a coordinated program by United Way of Santa Fe County (UWSFC) to tackle the challenges that face many children and their families in the Santa Fe area.

“Research shows that compounding adverse experiences for children from birth to five years old greatly increases the chances they’ll face problems at school and future economic and social problems later in life,” says Abby Bordner, UWSFC’s vice president of donor relations and communications.

Recent local research suggests that of the 365 babies born each year in the city’s fastest-growing neighborhoods, 95 percent start life in poverty. Three out of four of those children fail in school, underlining how economic hardship can harm a child’s chance of long-term success

“Children from low-income families typically start kindergarten unprepared, leading to struggles in school,” says Bordner. “Kaune Kids aims to ensure that children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn and succeed not just academically, but through their emotional resiliency and self-regulation.”

A link in a longer UWSFC chain of early childhood support from birth, the Kaune Kids program currently offers free year-round preschool for 70 children from Santa Fe County, chosen by a lottery system from the 300 applicants.

Four of the renovated classrooms are currently in use. Ultimately, 13 classrooms will house around 200 students.

The bilingual preschool program follows a play-based curriculum with numeracy and literacy components, along with a social/emotional component.

The setting for the preschool is the former Kaune Elementary school site (including its John Gaw Meem-designed main building), which the UWSFC purchased as part of a four-year \$5 million capital campaign. Contributions included support from Los Alamos National Laboratory workers through its employee giving campaign, and an investment from Lab contractor Los Alamos National Security, LLC.

The building is being substantially renovated, and currently four classrooms, a library, cafeteria and offices are in use. Ultimately 13 classrooms will house around 200 students, and the center will become a hub for a range of resources and services to support children, their families and early childhood educators. A collaboration with The Food Dept will prepare 2000 meals a day made in the updated kitchen and distributed to the preschool students and others in the community facing hunger, including students in the Santa Fe Public Schools.

“It took a lot of work from ourselves, our donors and our partners to get to this point,” says Bordner. “But having the children in the classrooms now makes it all worthwhile.”

The aim is for Kaune Kids to become a model for other integrated programs around the state, strengthening the community one child and family at a time.

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